Shame and Guilt

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Perhaps we ought to be more struck than we are by the significance given to shame in the Biblical tale of Adam and Eve. One can understand that guilt and remorse follow from Adam and Eve's transgression in Paradise, but the reason for the appearance of shame is less obvious.

Of course, at one level the reason for the appearance of shame is obvious enough. In Paradise nakedness is innocent and natural since all desire and thoughts are pure, whereas after the fall desire becomes lustful, and so nakedness becomes lewdness. I don't think this explains everything, however. More on this later.

The treatment of nakedness and shame in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is noteworthy n this respect, at least if we follow a point of view put forward by Stanley Fish in an old but still valuable work called *Surprised by Sin* (1967). Fish's argument is that Milton deliberately makes us aware of the unbridgeable moral distance that separates us from the prelapsarian world of Adam and Eve, and thereby forces us to see how sinful and fallen we are. Milton achieves this end, argues Fish, by a careful choice of words that on the one hand describe the naturalness and innocence of all creatures in Paradise, and this includes Adam and Eve, but that on the other make it impossible for us no longer innocent creatures to avoid invoking lasciviousness and hence our own sense of shame.

I would like to explore the phenomenon of shame, its connection with religion, and its place and significance in human society. And I would like to say something about the place it occupies for us today, what has become of it. My argument will fall fairly naturally into two parts, reflecting two different but related aspects of shame. These are shame as linked to the body and hence to modesty and chastity and the like; and shame as linked to an old-fashioned and rather aristocratic virtue of honour.
I will begin with a few preliminary observations.

First, a linguistic comment: Guilt and shame to some extent are part of the same series having to do with blame, responsibility, regret, remorse, and so on. But there are obvious differences. It is not a simple coincidence of language that guilt and shame don't behave linguistically in the same way. Think of the two pairs: guilt and guiltless; and shame and shameless. It may or not be a compliment to say of someone that they are guiltless, but in any case to say that someone is guiltless is to alleviate them of any responsibility or blame. However if I say of someone that they are shameless, that they are without shame, I can hardly be said to be praising them for their moral rectitude. The antonym of shame is closer to modesty and chastity. The difference between the two cases is significant, perhaps. Is it a mere accident of language that we use one word "shame" in these two senses? Perhaps not. Note that French makes the same distinction: "*la honte*" in the same two senses, and "*la pudeur*" in the sense of modesty. "*La modestie*", on the other hand is used in the sense of a "modes sum", or not boastful.

Second, if we look to distinguish shame and guilt, an important reference is Jacques-Alain Miller's "Note sur la honte" in which he suggests that shame is a primary affect and guilt is a secondary one.[1] This primary / secondary difference between shame and guilt is an interesting suggestion and in his analysis Miller suggests that, on the one hand, guilt is a consequence of a relationship to the Other where the Other judges and harbours values that the subject has transgressed. And on the other, shame is the consequence of a relationship with the Other's gaze, where the Other doesn't judge but simply looks. Hence, the significance of nudity or nakedness as a source of shame—and this happens quite independently of anything of the order of transgression or immoral acts, or even of lewdness. Moreover, shame can be, and typically is, localised so that one or other part of the body is the source, or better the seat, of shame. Modesty and chasteness (in its original sense) has its origin here. Not just Christianity but all three great monotheistic religions, which have effectively set the preconditions of our own society, introduce shame and modesty from the outset.

It seems not unreasonable to say that in *Paradise Lost* shame is a primary affect, an affect that is indicative of man's relationship to God. Perhaps we can say that today it is not a relation to God, but to others, or the social and cultural bond that binds the social

[1] In *La Cause freudienne* no. 54, June 2003, pp. 6-19.

order. Because this social order reflects our bonds to all others and not to any particular other, ie because it permeates all social relations, Lacan distinguishes between the other with a small o, the little other, and the big Other, with a capital O. This big Other carries some of the characteristics that philosophers and theologians, in particular, have ascribed to God—but this is another story.

Third, shame does seem to be closely tied up with religion. In particular, the three great monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam give an important place to shame and related phenomena, such as modesty and chastity (in the sense of pure in thought and deed). Today's societies have been influenced by these traditions, which are our heritage, and shame takes different forms, but it is not absent from any of the cultures influenced by monotheistic religions, and there are some common features.

Fourth, shame does not seem capable of the same powerful pathogenic role as guilt. Guilt is not only the recognition of having *done* wrong but, more puzzling perhaps, it can be the consequence of mere *desiring*. Guilt can even be the result of desires, particularly unconscious desires, that would *never* be acted on. Thus the super-ego censures and punishes us for the sins we commit; but since the super-ego is also an internal agency, it also punishes us for the sins that we *don't* commit. We thus understand a little about the ravages of unconscious guilt and Freud shows the place that it occupied in the life of Dostoyevsky in his paper "Dostoyevsky and Parricide". We also know that guilt is very often, if not always, a powerful factor in obsessional neurosis.

The myth on which *Paradise Lost* is based is a myth of the fall. And like any myth worthy of the name, this myth is intended to explain some fundamental aspect of the human condition. I suggest that the myth of the fall is an explanation of what Freud addresses in *Civilization and its Discontents*, that is the dissatisfaction, the malaise, *das Unbehagen*, that humankind experiences as a result of the fact that we live in a human society, and this despite all the obvious benefits of social organisation.

For Freud the source of this discontent is guilt, an unconscious sense of guilt that marks our being in the social world. It is, he thinks, a result of the renunciations that the

requirements of a social order compel us to make: aggression against one's neighbour; the restriction upon and regulation of our sexual desires.

There are links between the Puritan god of *Paradise Lost* and the Freudian superego. Milton's god has been described as ruthless and harsh, narrow and cruel—as a pitiless God who "makes the blood ruin cold". He has the same harsh, cruel and inexorable qualities as the Freudian super-ego. Indeed, Freud struggled for a long time to account for this vicious face of the super-ego. The excessiveness of its inexorable cruelty, pitted against the subject him or herself puzzled him: what was its origin? At first seeing it as a reflection of the harsh discipline of the parents, Freud subsequently realised that its severity was far in excess of any punitive aspect of the parents. He finally realised that the source of the superego's harsh and punitive character lay in the forsaking of aggression towards the other which was then turned back upon the subject.

Lacan comes to a slightly different conclusion. He saw that the figures of mother and father greatly exceed the parental couple and draws upon the full panoply of social and cultural meanings that the terms accrue. Thus, while Freud saw God as the father writ large, on a cosmic scale—this is Freud's reductionism—Lacan believed that religion throws light upon what a father is and what a mother is—thus he speaks not of the father but of the "Name-of-the-Father", which, because it is a cultural product he called a signifier. This designates a symbolic place that a person occupies, more or less adequately, along with other signifiers—the Mother, the phallus as mother's desire—it forms part of the symbolic, or what at times he calls the Other.

Fifth, shame touches the body. It takes different forms in different cultures and religions. In France there is an ongoing saga over the ban on the wearing of the veil in French schools. The authorities insist that it's a ban on all "ostentatious" displays of religion in a lay state. But no one is duped by this and everyone knows that it is the Muslim veil that is the real target, whatever the declared official position is said to be. The intense debate and deeply divided opinion over and opposition to the French government's ban indicates that the cultural and religious differences signify, at the same time, deep-seated cultural and religious allegiances as well.

Sixth, shame particularly concerns sexual difference, but is not equally distributed, as it were. Shame attaches itself more specifically to the woman's body. This is particularly true of the monotheistic religions in which, traditionally, modesty and chastity have been considered more virtuous in women than in men and have been signified by covering up and veiling the female form.

Seventh**,** another striking feature of shame is that it is not only one's own behaviour that for each of us can be a source of shame, but also the behaviour of others, when it is somebody else who goes beyond the limits of decency and modesty. Each of us is affected by the shame of others.

Eighth, veiling is not only a sign of modesty, but also, and this would be paradoxical if the phenomenon were not so familiar, veiling increases the object's erotic power and desirability. As a matter of fact, eroticism makes use of this with its constant deferral of the moment of unveiling. And the hysteric relies upon it as well. It also the kernel of truth in the attitude of the psychotic who was appalled that all the women in the street were naked under their clothing.

The 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant makes an interesting comment on the increased erotic value of the veiled object. In a paper called "Conjectures on the Beginnings of Human History" (1786) Kant argues that the "social instinct", as he calls it, by which nature provides for the preservation of each species, is second in importance after the "instinct of nutrition", by which nature preserves the individual. While sexual activity in animals is transitory and periodic, the faculty of imagination in humans enables them not only to prolong but also augment sexual desire which as a result becomes more enduring and uniform. Thus, sexual desire is enhanced as the sexual object is increasingly removed from the senses.

Note that Kant's view here has three parts. Shame is prior to morality, and therefore prior to culpability and guilt; Modesty, and therefore shame, arise when the human body is veiled; and More importantly, the human body is veiled, not because it is desirous, but in the interest of enhancing and prolonging its sexual attractiveness. This is, incidentally, an extraordinary view for the Pietist Kant, one that is closer to Eastern forms of eroticism from Persia to China than to Western sexual morality.

Kant, as philosopher of the Enlightenment, then goes so far as to say that the “fig leaf”, as he puts it, is a significant step in the development of reason and, since it is a function of reason, morality. In a remark reminiscent of Freud, he adds that refusal, *Versagung*—which is the term Freud uses, though it is translated as “frustration”, misleadingly, since it is close to forsaking—was the means by which man moved from purely sensual desires to ideals, from animal desire to love, and, ultimately, from what is simply agreeable to one’s senses to a taste for beauty. *Decency* (and therefore, we might add, *shame*), he comments, are the first signs of man’s formation as a moral creature.

In the above-mentioned paper, Miller refers top one philosopher who gives shame a central place in the field of all human relations, in the relations between self and other. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness,* attempts to describe the *phenomenology* of shame, that is, the place of shame in our lived experience, with a now famous example: the man who is spying through a keyhole and is surprised by the sound of footsteps in the hallway.

I am, he says, peeping through a keyhole at some—unspecified—scene in the next room which I am regarding with absorbed attention. I am disturbed by footsteps in the hallway and realise that I am no longer alone but am being looked at, or gazed at, by another person. Sartre’s description and analysis has two moments to it. In the first, “I am looking through the keyhole at the scene in the next room. I am not aware or conscious of myself, I have no self-awareness, but am absorbed by and hence conscious only of the scene unfolding in the next room.” In the second moment, I hear footsteps in the hallway. I realise that I am being looked at. I become conscious of myself and I feel ashamed.

The example depicts shame as having the effect of some sort of subjective fall or degradation. When I am initially looking through the keyhole I am a pure spectator subject, completely absorbed by the spectacle, unaware of myself and, even, he says, at this moment I am nothing. In the second moment I am startled by the sound, and the footsteps bring forth or produce the gaze as such. I don’t even need to see the other person; the mere awareness of his presence (footsteps in the hallway) makes me conscious of myself and this self-conscious-through-the-gaze-of-the-other is coeval

with my sense of shame. Shame, says Sartre, is a product of my encounter with the other, my counterpart.

I want to stress the quasi-anonymity of this phenomenon, where it's the mere presence of the other that shames me, a quasi-anonymity that the French language expresses well with its "On me regarde". I need not know who it is; it is a sort of generalised other person, even a depersonalised gaze which comes from no particular point of view.

At first absent from his or her action, this subject who sees himself being seen becomes an object in the world, through the mediation of the other. And Sartre tries to capture this fall of the subject in a status of shameful reject; we might say the subject becomes, not an object, but an abject, for the other.

On Sartre's analysis there is a combination of shame and guilt in this example. Miller criticises Sartre's failure to distinguish between the two, because he thinks they are different.

Sartre declares that under the gaze my existence is reduced to that of a physical object, which is to deny one's "transcendence", that is, to deny one's projects and plans that lead into the future, to deny the meaning that the spying action might have for me and that might be its justification—there is after all no need that my interest in the spectacle be salacious.

Miller compares this with a judgement, which he claims is different. A judgement, at the very least, implies speech. There may be perfectly good reasons for looking through the keyhole, and perhaps it is what is on the other side that is to be judged and reproached.

If you accept this distinction between shame and guilt, then you might be prepared also to accept Miller's suggestion that we can analyse shame as something like the generalised, effectively anonymous, presence of the gaze of the Other. And look for the origins of guilt elsewhere. We thus place shame, modesty and chastity, or an essential core of shame, modesty and chastity, squarely in the register of the specular, the visual. And not in the field of speech and language.

This, at least, seems to be the case in our monotheistic religions where shame and modesty have a particularly significant place that they don't necessarily occupy elsewhere.

Or at least shame and modesty "have had" a particularly significant place. For can we say that there has there been a decline in the gaze of the Other in its function as the vehicle of shame? Eric Laurent has suggested that we only have to consider Big Brother and reality shows—and isn't all TV today a reality show?—to be struck by the absence of shame and modesty on television.[2] Who hasn't been struck by the readiness of participants to cast of their inhibitions—their modesty—and "show all", "do anything" for the sake of the camera? Isn't it the case, Laurent asks, that the spectator's gaze, the gaze looking at reality TV, is a gaze deprived of its ability to shame. And isn't this constantly being demonstrated today, again and again?

There is something further, which is this. As hard as it might be to believe this sometimes, there is actually an audience for reality TV, and if there is something that fascinates, as there clearly is, in such shows, perhaps it can be summed up with this: "Look at them enjoying". I use this expression, "Look at them enjoying", deliberately. In English we say, "To enjoy something" and "To enjoy oneself", but the object *something* and the reflexive *oneself* don't have the same value; one doesn't enjoy *oneself* as one enjoys *some thing*. Moreover, it is the fact that they are enjoying, not *what* they are enjoying, particularly, that fascinates. So perhaps there is some relationship between the reality TV display which says, "There is no shame anymore", on the one hand, and the spectator's gaze which says, "Look at them enjoying".

This would mean, then, that there is a development from the internalised shame before the omniscience of an all-seeing God. Sartre describes a completely different situation, on ein which the omniscience has disappeared into the silence of the infinite spaces, as it were. Here there is no omniscience, only the generalised and view of a particular but anonymous other. And, finally, the gaze that does not bring shame to the other, but is

[2] Presentation at J.-A. Miller's *Cours*, 29 May 2002.

instead, a gaze that it is an element in the enjoyment of the other, and it is also a gaze that enjoys.